ACCELERATE YOUR CAREER

FAST TRACK TO SUCCESS

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

PATRICK HARPER-SMITH
& SIMON DERRY

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4 **Indicate duration of each task and add up the total time required to complete each route ("path") through the network.** The longest route is known as the critical path, which shows the shortest possible duration for the project.

So what? What does the critical path do for me?

When you know the critical path, you can understand many other elements of planning your project and the resources required. You can:

- ➔ Calculate the start and end dates of the project (add the start date to the critical path total duration, and you have a finish date; or, if you prefer, take the project deadline and subtract the total duration of the critical path to create the start date—usually this is the point at which you find out you should have started a week ago).
- ➔ Use the network diagram to find opportunities for shortening the project schedule by looking at where you can cut task times on activities on the critical path.
- ➔ Use resources wisely by understanding that tasks not on the critical path have some "slack time" and that allocating resources to these tasks to reduce the overall project duration will not work.
- ➔ Understand the progress of the project by closely monitoring the tasks on the critical path, given delays in these tasks will delay the whole project.
- ➔ Schedule noncritical path tasks and delay or advance them according to progress.
- ➔ Tailor your project diary to ensure that you are supervising the tasks on the critical path as a priority, as opposed to spending time on tasks of less importance.

We are constantly amazed as to why intelligent senior managers seem to think that throwing resources at a project will result in a quicker result. Time after time resources, blood, sweat, and tears are spent on tasks that

are not on the critical path. Yet management still believe that speeding up those individual tasks will benefit the whole project. A simple explanation of the critical path and how it works and an understanding of the concept of slack time are often all that is needed for senior managers to take a more considered view of allocating resources to speed up projects.

5 ISSUES AND RISKS
Planning contingencies

Well-constructed plans all have at least one thing in common—they all come up against unexpected and changing circumstances. Just because you have activities scheduled, it doesn't mean they will go according to plan. As a result, good project managers should apply some basic risk management principles to their project and plans.

However, it is not possible to pre-empt every eventuality that could harm the project. It is, therefore, good practice to get the core project team to consider what it will do if certain threats become reality so as to minimize the impact of them. This is, in essence, contingency planning. There are many very complex risk management tools and techniques that can be employed by the project manager today. However, just understanding the basics can really help.

Contingency action plans are there to address the effects of a risk once it has become reality. They are not there to minimize the chance or probability of something happening, but to reduce the effects. You may never use them, but there is a risk you may have to, so plan them in advance. It's as simple as making a decision about an umbrella. You need to take an umbrella with you when going for a walk in case it rains. It's no use when getting wet, wishing you had picked up your umbrella on the way out. On the other hand, you may never need the umbrella, so having it may seem an unnecessary burden or expense.

How do I create a contingency plan?

Contingency plans should be part of a full risk management approach, including assessments of risks and pre-emptive actions. However, as a basic, quick tool, try the following process:

1. Discuss the threats to the project plan regularly with the core team and prioritize and decide which threats need the most attention.
2. Be specific and focus on the top few risks and think through, perhaps with subject matter experts, the possible effects of a risk if it occurs.
3. Create a formal contingency plan and evaluate cost with whoever supplies the necessary resources.
4. Set a formal "trigger" with those in charge of the contingency plan. The trigger is an action, event, or date whereby the contingency plan is put into action. All involved should know what this trigger is, as without it the contingency plan is useless and becomes a waste of resources.
5. Document the contingency plan and triggers and keep them with the project documentation. This information will feed into the next project you do and help in planning future risk management strategies. The plan and triggers should be part of your risk register.

QUICK TIP ***FEASIBILITY***

Check feasibility: Make sure you are not undertaking a task that cannot be achieved. Review objectives widely beforehand.

Remember that the more stakeholders involved in planning for contingencies, the better the plan. If there is a strong likelihood that the contingency plan will need to be put into action, then factor it into the project plan in advance so that it becomes part of the plan. Time spent validating the plan and preparing for problems in advance is rarely time wasted. As a project manager, you should double-check the entire contingency plan before you start to implement the project.

From a personal perspective we have taken contingency planning out of projects and into day-to-day business. Often when travelling around the world to events, conferences, and training sessions, we are aware that airlines and airports seem to make an increasingly frequent habit of losing luggage. We therefore now take contingency planning to such an extent that we almost expect luggage to be delayed or lost en route. Therefore, when sending materials, handouts, books, and so on, we always keep one set of everything with us and all the paperwork on flash drives that hang around our necks. If either of us gets to the destination and, surprise surprise, the materials are not there, at least if we can get to a photocopier or a PC and printer we can run off some basic copies to get everything started.

If this, admittedly rather pessimistic, mindset was employed by all project managers, would there be fewer surprises in projects?

6 THE TEAM *Team selection*

Remember, it is people who make projects successful, not software or systems. So any project manager will want to select the best people for the job and use them effectively. However, many managers feel that they have little leeway when it comes to selecting members of their core project teams—they have whom they have, and there is very little choice. In addition, many project managers find that they don't have enough people to fill distinctive specialist project roles and that a number of people will have to double up in their roles.

Despite these limitations, it is worth having a look at the techniques that could support you as a project manager in the area of team selection. Build your team carefully because it will make or break the project. When you have found the person with the right skills, ask yourself:

- Do I know this person well enough to trust him?
- Will I be able to work comfortably with him?
- Will he get along with the other team members?
- Does she have the skills needed, or will she require some training?

Technical skills versus people skills

Think about a very successful project you have been part of in the past (come on, there must be one!). Then think about the project manager of that successful project and list the skills and abilities of that manager and how they directly contributed to the success of the project. When you have written them down, divide the skills and abilities into two types—those of a technical nature (e.g. planning skills, content knowledge of the project, risk management skills) and those of an interpersonal nature (e.g. good motivator, good communication skills, empathy, excellent delegation skills). You should find that the effective project manager has a combination of both types of skill—technical and interpersonal.

It is a well-known fact that people tend to recruit in their own image. We recruit those whom we are comfortable with in terms of their attitudes and outlook as well as their experience. But therein lies a problem for project managers when creating a core project team. People may have the necessary technical skills for the job, but if everyone is technical by nature or training there is a risk that the team may not have much in the way of people skills, or vice versa.

Assess your core team's abilities—are they all technical geniuses but not that comfortable standing up and talking to people and listening to their ideas, or are they the opposite—great empathizers but with little or no content knowledge of the project on hand and no planning skills whatsoever? If this is the case, you need to move toward a balance. Start recruiting to your team people whose skills and, more importantly, abilities complement yours, rather than duplicate them.

Key team roles

In any team you need to look for people to carry out team roles as well as functional roles. To operate efficiently you, as the team leader and project manager, will want someone to perform the following roles:

- **Coordinator/administrator.** Someone who pulls together the work of the team as a whole and keeps all the paperwork/IT databases up to date.
- **Critic.** The guardian and analyst of the team's effectiveness, who challenges people when standards and quality drop.

- **Ideas person.** Someone who innovates and looks for new ways of doing things and for potential shortcuts.
- **Implementer.** A person who ensures that the team's actions and decisions are put into place and are seen through.
- **External contact.** Someone who oversees external contacts and relations with third parties.
- **Inspector.** The quality guru who looks to ensure that a project has high quality throughout and that the team works to high standards. The inspector should always seek to establish new standards and ways of working that raise standards. In contrast to the critic, the inspector should always cite alternatives and options.
- **Expert.** The technical specialist required for certain parts of the project or for detailed analysis. There may be more than one.

As you appoint people to the team, check off each of these roles to make sure that someone in the team leans toward that sort of contribution. You may discuss this team role with them or not, depending on circumstances (and politics).

Build a team that takes advantage of the individuals' skills and avoids the impact of their weaknesses. Remember, especially if you are involved with projects for third parties or external clients, you should ask potential team members if they identify with the aims and objectives of the project. They do not have to agree with them totally, but they must at least feel comfortable with why the organization needs to achieve them.

We are increasingly aware that seniority and job description do not always determine competence and that when forming a team attitude and dependability count for a lot. In a London-based banking corporation, a series of tasks within a major project required the gathering of information from a number of directors and senior managers. They had a reputation for being rather tardy in meeting deadlines that they did not see as being personal priorities. With this in mind, we included in the project team a couple of personal assistants, one of whom especially had a reputation of being something of a Rottweiler when it came to getting jobs done. She took it as an insult on her professional integrity if tasks she asked for were